

Volunteers are the lifeblood of WAM.

With their generosity we have a community of women who share willingly of their time, their skills, and their compassion to build a connection with a woman who often doesn't have anyone in her corner.

In May we get the opportunity to recognise and celebrate our volunteers. You can read more about what we've been up to in this update.

Celebrating National Volunteer Week in the past has often been linked with our activities for Law Week, as the two occur at the same time of the year. In recent years we have hosted informative events around understanding women's pathways to the criminal justice system, changes to Bail laws, life after contact with the legal system and incarceration. Acknowledging our volunteers was often embedded into those activities.

However, this year we focused on Volunteer Week to recognise the generosity and care given by our volunteer mentors. Being housed at the iconic QVWC building, we took advantage of the gallery space by holding an exhibition.

We asked our program participants to share with us a little bit of their mentoring journey, and we were privileged to have several women take up our invitation to demonstrate their talents. Some of our mentors and team members also contributed to the exhibition we titled: *Picturing My Strengths – Creating the WAMily album*.



The narrative pieces accompanying each of the artworks demonstrated to us how critical having the support of a mentor has been, whether it was going for noodles, op-shopping for household items, or working through the various stages of their contact with the legal system. Our volunteer mentors similarly showed how important their mentees had become to their lives, the pride in seeing women rediscover their strengths and building their identity, sharing stories over coffee or a walk.

We are grateful to the Jack Brockhoff Foundation and MinterEllison Charitable Trust for their support in assisting us with this exhibition, and we look forward to it being held annually.

The celebrations continued in June, as our Founding Director, Ann Polis, was recognised with an Order of Australia medal in the King's birthday honours list.

Ann Polis has lived and worked in Fitzroy all her adult life and has sought myriad opportunities both to assist individuals and contribute to her whole community. In the 1970s Ann was the founding editor of The Melbourne Times newspaper, pioneering investigative journalism, she then went on to work as a trainer with the Trade Union.

Decades of her life have also been committed to grassroots community activism and participation in the City of Yarra, with roles at The Wellington Inc, Fitzroy Primary School, Fitzroy Residents' Association, Neighbourhood Justice Centre, and the Northern Metropolitan Region of the Adult Community and Further Education Board. She has also volunteered with Yarra's Companion Animal Support program, and VACRO's woman-to-woman mentoring program for women exiting prison.

It was here that Ann learned more about the vulnerabilities experienced by so many women in the justice system, their insufficient access to services, and the negative impact imprisonment had on them. Ann well-understood that by addressing the specific needs of women as early as possible, it may help to reduce their offending and improve their well-being.

Engaging her networks in Yarra, Ann was instrumental in the establishment of the Yarra Women's Mentoring Program, now known as Women and Mentoring (WAM).

We are proud to continue to uphold Ann's mission.

- Tricia Ciampa, Executive Officer
tricia@womenandmentoring.org.au



Picturing My Strengths – art exhibition

In May, as part of Volunteer Week, we launched our inaugural art exhibition, Picturing My Strengths – Creating the WAMily album, inviting program participants, mentors and our team to enter a piece of art that depicts what mentoring means to them.

Through the various pieces on display, we celebrated women's journeys through the legal system, their feelings of support and connection, and their achievements.

One of our past program participants, Emily, helped launch the event with these words:

Hello, my name is Emily. I became involved with WAM as a participant in Oct/Nov 2021. At the end of a lengthy time dealing with the legal system as a result of a car accident. These dealings caused a lot of stress, anxiety and depression.

When I first met Karen my mentor, we clicked immediately. It was like we had been friends for years. Sarah from WAM really did a great job in matching Karen and me. Karen was very understanding, empathetic and most of all she did not judge me on my past.

I instantly felt safe to talk to her about anything and she would offer support and guidance in any way she could. We met up once a week for coffee and a chat. I felt just the simple act of getting out of the house and into social settings, helped me in more ways than I ever would have thought. I became less anxious about social settings and my confidence grew.

Over the next few months a few great things happened. I got my license back, which took a few hurdles to go through. Then I passed the NDIS workers screening check which was required for me to be able to go back to my job. This took about 6 months when the normal time frame is 8 weeks. This was due to the legal proceedings. Once I passed that check I was over the moon as it meant I could finally go back to work after an 18 month leave of absence.

Returning to work was amazing for me. I had worked there for 12 years and was very much looking forward to going back to what I know and love, plus all the amazing people that were so supportive to me over the past few years.



As of April, I am now in my 15th year at my job. I've been back a year and half now and I recently recommenced full time again. Having started back only a few days a week, I feel I have achieved my goal by getting back to how things used to be. Karen was very supportive in my return to work, with the NDIS workers check being emotionally stressful and taking so long she helped me through what felt like an endless waiting period.

During my time off work, I got into Art Therapy, and this opened up my mind to a new outlet of expression and a way to heal. I started with no skill at all, but I loved giving it a go anyway.

I have come a long way since then and my skills have developed over time and it has given me a passion and something to be proud of, I feel I have achieved a lot. Not only art skills but my confidence and independence has grown and I'm also proud to say the stress, anxiety and depression are all a thing of the past. As too are the legal issues.

I cannot recommend the Women of WAM enough, they are an amazing bunch of people. I am so grateful for the opportunity to showcase one of my paintings here today.



Volunteer Training – An Introduction to Acquired Brain Injury

Last month we provided professional development training to our mentors on the topic of Acquired Brain Injury.

In recent years, an important issue has come to light regarding the prevalence of women in the justice system who have Acquired Brain Injuries (ABI). In Victoria, the intersection of gender and brain injury has gained recognition as a significant challenge that requires attention and support.

A study run by Corrections Victoria found that 33% of women in Victorian prisons have an ABI, compared with 2% in the general Australian community. However, we suspect that the actual rate is much higher than that, considering how difficult it is to get an assessment that formally diagnoses an ABI.

This high prevalence can be attributed to multiple factors, including the high rates of family violence, trauma, disadvantage, and substance dependence experienced by women who are involved in the justice system.

It is already known that women who are involved in the justice system have unique pathways to criminalisation. ABI can further exacerbate the difficulties women face in getting support that addresses their unique needs. It is no wonder that these women are socially isolated and often disengaged from their families.

What in an ABI?

Acquired Brain Injury refers to any damage to the brain that occurs after birth and is not related to a congenital or degenerative condition. ABI can result from traumatic incidents such as motor vehicle

accidents or assaults, or non-traumatic circumstances such as stroke, prolonged substance use, hypoxia (loss of oxygen to the brain) or medical conditions such as infection or degenerative neurological conditions.

An ABI does not affect a person's intellect or physical appearance, but it does cause a range of cognitive impairments and emotional and socially challenging behaviours. People have a range of resulting difficulties, including poor memory and concentration, difficulty planning and organising, as well as trouble with new learning, consequential thinking and regulating their emotional response.

As a result, people with an ABI often have difficulty attending appointments, remembering important information, changing their behaviour (even with the best of intentions), following conversations and making or sticking to plans. You can imagine how this might impact someone's daily life or their involvement in the justice system, and how hard it might be for those who have not yet been able to get a formal assessment to diagnose an ABI.

At WAM, we are committed to providing our mentors with the necessary training to excel in their roles. By doing so, mentors are equipped with the tools and knowledge to effectively support and inspire their mentees. By staying informed in the latest issues and practices, mentors can provide relevant guidance and help mentees navigate challenges that arise in their lives.

Training planned for our mentors for the rest of this year include trauma informed practice, professional boundaries and coercive control.

- Sara Raby, Intake & Assessment Coordinator

New additions to the WAMily

So far this year we have held two training sessions, and we welcome: Addriey, Alyssa, Bella, Brenda, Carmel, Christina, Hayley, Jemma, Joel, Joyce, Judy, Kate, Kim, Kristy, Leonie, Melissa, Olivia, and Sharyn, to the WAMily. We are looking forward to having you attend our monthly Peer Supervision, seeing you all matched and joining our new Mentor Book Club.

Bunnings Sausage Sizzle & Ballarat Expo

As part of our ongoing awareness raising in Ballarat, we held a sausage sizzle at Bunnings Delacombe on Easter Saturday. We braved the Ballarat welcome of chilly wind and rain to serve up approximately 700 sausages and met lots of the wonderful Ballarat folk.

Emily and Sarah also attended the Ballarat Volunteer expo at Barkly Square, connecting with a range of services in the region and some potential volunteers.

